





# TLS

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## THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

MAY 15 1981

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K'UNG SHANG-JEN:  
The Peach Blossom Fan  
Translated by Chen Shih-hsiang and  
Harold Acton, with the collaboration  
of Cyril Birch  
310pp. University of California Press.  
\$9.80. (Paperback, £2.80).  
\$20 029 283

With the possible exception of the  
Emperors of Japan, who trace their  
ancestry from the Sun Goddess  
Amaterasu, the heirs of Confucius  
must have the longest pedigree in the  
world. A great many of them, as  
might be expected, were nonentities;  
but a surprising number of them  
were not. They include the great  
scholar K'ung Ying-ta in the  
seventh century and Chiang Kai-  
shek's brother-in-law, the banker  
H. H. K'ung, in the twentieth. Perhaps  
the most interesting of them all was the  
playwright K'ung Shang-jen, a descendant  
of the Sage in the sixty-fourth  
generation who wrote the popular  
historical drama *The Peach Blossom*  
*Fan*.

K'ung Shang-jen was born in  
1644, three years after the collapse  
of the Ming restoration in Nanking,  
which is the subject of his play.  
History books date the end of the  
Ming dynasty and the beginning of  
the Ch'ing from the proclamation in  
Peiping of the young Manchu prince  
Fulin as Emperor of China in  
October 1644. Six months before  
that date the city had fallen to the  
rebel army of Li Tzu-ch'eng, and the  
thirty-three-year-old Ming emperor  
Ch'ing-chien, abandoned by most of  
his court, had hanged himself from a  
sophistic tree on Coal Hill, the artificial  
peak of the imperial palace. The  
garden he had summoned to his aid,  
caught between the rebel army of Li  
Tzu-ch'eng and the Manchu army  
under Dorgon, which had been  
driven, vulture-like, out of Man-  
churia by the news of Peking's fall,  
had surrendered to the latter and col-  
laborated with it in fighting Li Tzu-  
ch'eng. Dorgon's installation of his  
young nephew as the first emperor of  
a new dynasty in Peking took place  
less than four months after his troops  
took possession of the city.

In fact it was several months  
before Manchu control over even a  
substantial part of China was estab-  
lished; indeed, on the fringes of the  
rapidly expanding empire, the  
Ming resistance continued for  
years in the south-west until 1659,  
when the unfortunate Prince of Kuei  
(he was later extruded and bow-  
strung) fled with his entourage into  
Burma. In the south-east until as late  
as 1683, when a grandson of the gal-  
lant pirate king Cosima surrendered  
in Formosa. For most Chinese, how-  
ever, the surrender in June 1645 of  
Nanking, where a new imperial court  
had been set up by the Prince of Fu,  
was the event which distinguished any serious  
hope they may have entertained of  
a Ming revival, and it is the history  
of this short-lived Nanking court  
which makes the background of  
K'ung's play.

Nanking ("Southern Capital") had  
symbolic significance for the Ming  
dynasty. For one thing it had been  
the strategic base and later the  
administrative centre of the Found-  
ing Emperor of the dynasty. (It was  
not until the latter part of the third  
century that the Ming capital moved from Nanking to  
Peking.) But more than that it was  
the seat of Loyang, by the Hsiao in  
420 B.C., Nanking had been the cap-  
ital of a succession of southern dynas-  
ties, which the flame of Chi-  
nese culture burned on, unquelled by  
barbarian contamination. Except for  
the Mongols, whose conquerors could  
be thought of as an exception, the  
south had never come under foreign  
domination. This expected sequel to  
the traditional Chinese administra-  
tion, a peaceful reign of barbarian  
rulers, was a period of the Ming  
dynasty in which a pacific, highly

cultivated native Chinese administra-  
tion would be left in possession of  
the South.

The Manchus themselves seem ini-  
tially to have expected such an out-  
come of their aggression. They were,  
after all, (or believed themselves to  
be) descendants of the Jurchid  
"Chin" dynasty who had shared  
China in the twelfth century with the  
Southern Sung. Dorgon's offer to the  
embassy sent from Nanking in 1644  
to leave the South unmolested in  
return for some sort of token sub-  
mission may well have been sincere  
and was presumably made with such  
historical precedents in mind. It was  
the rapid collapse of the Nanking  
regime in the following year which  
encouraged a larger ambition and led  
on to the conquest of all China.

The invading Manchu army of  
1644 was not a large one, scarcely  
more numerous than the horde of  
eunuchs attached to the palace city  
in Peking. China in the mid-  
seventeenth century was far and  
away the greatest, richest, most  
populous country in the world. The  
Ming court had Western advisers  
who could both make and import  
cannon and hire gunners to fire  
them. What had reduced this great  
and powerful nation to a state of  
such degeneracy that a parcel of bar-  
barians from beyond the Wall could  
enter both of its capitals in little  
more than a twelvemonth, and each  
time without a battle? Patriot schol-  
ars like the great Wang Fu-ch'ien  
spent decades in their remote moun-  
tain retreats pondering the historical,  
political, philosophical causes of this  
demoralization. K'ung Shang-jen,  
though not even born when these  
events occurred, heard much about  
them from an uncle who had lived  
for some years with another relation  
who had been a member of the  
Nanking court, and was equally  
obsessed by them. His play, pon-  
dered, researched, written and  
rewritten over a period of many  
years, may be thought of as the ar-  
tistic equivalent of the historical-  
philosophical treatises of Wang Fu-  
ch'ien.

That this obsessive interest in  
recent history should have found  
expression in a dramatic form  
resembling *opera buffa* may at first  
seem somewhat strange. It could be  
explained in terms of attitudes. A  
Chinese playwright had to be able to  
write verse libretti and to select his  
own tunes, and K'ung Shang-jen was  
both a prolific - almost too pro-  
lific - poet and a competent musician;  
or it could be explained on political  
grounds: the "Southern" type of  
drama then in vogue was in the main  
devoted to poetical and sentimental  
themes and therefore less likely than  
any other form of literature to  
excite the suspicions of the Manchu  
authorities, always murderously sen-  
sitive to real or imagined slights.

In fact, neither of these explana-  
tions is necessary. For all his mul-  
titudinous interests - besides poetry  
and music already mentioned, these  
included classical studies, religious  
ceremonial, the design and manu-  
facture of ritual vessels, strategic  
studies and the collection of anti-  
ques - K'ung was a born dramatist  
and would have written plays where-  
ever or whenever he had been born in  
whatever dramatic form happened to  
be available. It came naturally to him  
to give whatever most interested him  
a dramatic expression. When, in pur-  
suit of his favourite hobby, he  
acquired a very rare T'ang musical  
instrument - a sort of fiddle - he  
wrote a play about it. In *The Peach*  
*Blossom Fan* he gave dramatic ex-  
pression not only to his obsessive  
interest in recent historical events,  
but to his other interests as well:  
poetry, music, drama and ritual. He  
has poets, musicians and a dramatist  
among his principal characters, and  
we see them both discussing and  
practising their arts; and K'ung  
Shang-jen puts himself in the play in  
the likeness of an aged Master of  
Ceremonies, calling out the direc-  
tions to participants in an elaborate  
ritual, just as he must have done at  
his Ancestor's birthplace in Shan-  
tung.

Until he was in his mid-thirties, it  
was as a semi-recluse in the moun-  
tains far from this birthplace that  
K'ung Shang-jen spent most of his  
life - a life, he tells us in his preface  
to *The Peach Blossom Fan*, which  
afforded him ample leisure to think  
about his projected play, a first draft  
of which appears to have been com-  
pleted by 1684. He had hesitated to  
begin writing it, the preface tells us,  
because he doubted whether he had  
sufficient knowledge and experience  
to avoid the risk of falsifying history.

This emphasis on historical accu-  
racy is typical of K'ung Shang-jen,  
who must be the only Chinese play-  
wright ever to furnish his play with a  
bibliography. True, his definition of  
historical accuracy seems to have  
been a somewhat elastic one: he  
must, for example, have known that  
his hero, whom he has ending his  
days in monastic retreat, in real life  
took an examination qualifying him  
for employment under the Manchus;  
and a too literal-minded interpreta-  
tion of a rhetorical expression once  
commonly used in Chinese obituary  
notices gives rise to a ridiculous  
scene in which a loyal Ming general  
impresses his mutinous troops by  
weeping actual tears of blood. But  
apart from these theatrical distor-  
tions and exaggerations, it remains  
true that, for a dramatist, K'ung  
Shang-jen is accurate and remarkably  
well-informed.

Opportunities to enlarge the  
"knowledge and experience" his play  
required occurred after his "dis-  
covery" by the Emperor K'ang-hsi in  
the following year. K'ang-hsi stopped  
at Confucius's birthplace in Shan-  
tung on his way back to Peking from  
the first of his Southern Tours in  
1685. The Tours were elaborate  
exercises in what we should now-  
days call public relations, in which  
the Manchu emperor was anxious to  
show himself benevolent towards his  
Chinese subjects and appreciative of  
their culture. It was therefore essen-  
tial that he should visit the Confu-  
cian shrine if he was going to be in  
that area. K'ung Shang-jen was  
commanded to lecture to the  
emperor on selected Confucian texts  
and to act as his guide on a con-  
ducted tour of the sights. In the  
detailed account he later published  
of these events he observed that  
K'ang-hsi stayed longer at each of  
the sacred places and asked more  
questions about it than any other  
emperor had done in the whole of  
recorded history. He also noted,  
thriftily Confucian that he was, when  
the emperor was making his kotow  
at the Sage's tomb, that there was a  
conspicuous darn in the lining of his  
robe.

An outcome of this encounter was  
K'ung's appointment first to a pro-  
fessorship in Peking and then, in  
1686, to a post which he occupied  
for several years in River Conser-  
vancy in the area north of Nanking.  
The job proved a disappointing one.  
Owing to a difference of opinion  
among the experts, flood control was  
at a standstill while commissions car-  
ried out surveys and made reports  
and the planners intrigued and  
struggled against each other in Pek-  
ing. As time went by many of those  
in subordinate positions drifted away,  
and in one of his poems K'ung  
Shang-jen discursively observed  
that he was almost the only one left  
in his office. He could visit Nanking,  
however, and Yangchow, and see the  
famous sights, and even get to know  
some of the elderly survivors of '45,  
one of whom appears as a character  
in his play. In 1689 he returned to  
his teaching post in the Peking  
Academy in which he continued for  
another four years until his appoint-  
ment to a Secretaryship in the Board  
of Revenue in 1694.

He was still in this last appoint-  
ment in 1699 when the third and  
final draft of *The Peach Blossom Fan*  
was completed and at once acclaimed  
by those who were fortunate enough  
to read it. "Princes and persons of  
quality had copies made of it," he  
tells us somewhat complacently in his  
preface. "The price of paper was said  
to have gone up as a consequence."  
Even K'ang-hsi heard of the new  
play, and K'ung Shang-jen found  
himself answering a midnight call  
from the Palace commanding him to  
supply a copy for imperial perusal  
forthwith. His own manuscript was

on loan and he had to borrow a  
copy from a friend. Some months  
later, at a private performance in the  
house of a high-ranking official, he  
was gratified to observe several  
elderly ex-officials of the previous  
dynasty weeping audibly as they  
watched his play.

Although it was to be another  
eight years before it appeared in  
print, the play was undoubtedly a  
great success; but it cost its author  
his job. K'ang-hsi always professed  
to think highly of *The Peach Blossom*  
*Fan* (in the same spirit, perhaps,  
as that in which his father Fulin had  
insisted on having a patriotic Ming  
song played for him while he dined);  
but the fact remains that shortly after  
the midnight call from the Palace  
K'ung Shang-jen was relieved of his  
post at the Board of Revenue and as  
long as he lived was never again to  
hold public office. A mystery sur-  
rounds his dismissal, but dismissal it  
certainly was, since his own K'ung  
relations later spoke of his returning  
home "in disgrace".

Of course, there is no anti-Manchu  
sentiment in the play: except in the  
Prologue and Epilogue, in each of  
which very respectful reference is  
made to the reigning emperor, no  
Manchu is so much as mentioned.  
It Nor were stage expressions of  
loyalist sentiment such as occur in  
Scene 32, where most of the cast are  
shown on their knees in front of the  
spirit-tablet of the royal martyr,  
Ch'ing-chien, likely to have given  
serious offence. The Manchu rulers,  
in common with other autocrats,  
liked to see respect paid to their  
predecessors. If K'ang-hsi was really  
offended by this play - and the fact is  
still disputed by Chinese scholars - it  
would have been at the controversial  
nature of the subject rather than  
K'ung's treatment of it. Political  
activity of any kind was abhorrent to  
the Manchu emperors, particularly  
factionalism of the kind so vividly  
portrayed in *The Peach Blossom*  
*Fan*. Probably he would have  
thought K'ung unsound, if not actu-  
ally dangerous, merely for having  
chosen such a theme.

*The Peach Blossom Fan* is a long  
and complex drama (forty scenes and  
more than thirty characters). It is a  
love-story - that of the young scholar  
Hou Fang-yü and the Nanking courtesan  
Li Hsiang-chün - set  
against a broad historical back-  
ground: the rise and fall of the  
Prince of Fu's short-lived, Imperial  
restoration in Nanking. Almost all  
the characters, down to the minor  
ones, are based on real people.  
Except for the Epilogue, the whole  
action takes place in little more than  
two years (1643-1645) and nearly all  
in Nanking. To understand it, some  
prior knowledge of Ming history,  
particularly of the last two or three  
decades of it, is indispensable.

Chinese, like Russian, absolutism  
tended to get worse rather than  
better as time went by. The office of  
Prime Minister, so important under  
the urbane and civilized Sung, was  
abolished by the paranoid Founder  
of the Ming dynasty. He was to be  
his own Prime Minister; his ministers  
were to be trembling lackeys, wait-  
ing in almost all important matters  
on his decision. But during the three  
centuries which followed the Ming  
imperial line became so effete that  
some emperors never appeared in  
court at all for years on end. Under  
these circumstances the palace  
eunuchs, who alone had access to the  
emperor when he was "inside",  
began to arrogate to themselves  
many of the imperial powers,  
expanding in the course of time into  
a huge palace bureaucracy number-  
ing tens of thousands and reinforcing  
their power with a wide-ranging sec-  
ret service, in whose dungeons and  
torture-chambers members of the  
Confucian mandarin class who craved  
them were liable to disappear.

Against this menace the scholar-  
gentry, particularly in the South,  
was, by the end of the sixteenth

## Poem

The lights glow,  
What will happen next?  
Night has fallen.  
The rain stops.  
What will happen next?  
Night will deepen.  
He does not know  
What I will say to him.  
What he has gone  
I'll have to find in his ear  
And say what I was about to say  
At the meeting about to happen  
Which has now taken place.  
But he said nothing.  
As the meeting about to take place.  
It is only now that he turns and looks  
And whispers:  
I do not know  
What will happen next?

Harold Pinter







decent industrious lives of working folk."

It is at moments like this that the reader most feels the need of firmer editorial guidance, the changes of tone and attitude are too much at variance with each other, the text not just confused but slightly out of control. Too often the reader wants to ask, did Harding hold these apparently contradictory attitudes at one and the same time? If not, when was one replaced by the other? He can describe his own part in a gang fight like this: "The Coon had a face like the map of England. He was knocked about terrible. . . . I hit him with a broken glass, made a terrible mess of his face. I knew I'd hurt him a lot, but not anything that could be serious." Yet once in prison he feels himself to be set apart from the other men: "The strange thing about these men was that none belonged to gangs or were criminal types. Most were serving sentences for violence." If there are subtle distinctions being made here then they need to be explained. Perhaps Harding sees no contradictions at all, but, like stealing the coal as a child, simply gauges the morality of an action according to what is got out of it. "All Simpson was the type to do it," he says revealingly of a murder in 1900. "He wasn't a thief but a hooligan—stealing people and all that sort of thing. He didn't make any money at it."

Relationships with the police are portrayed in a similarly ambivalent manner. Harding assumes, perhaps realistically, that most policemen are crooked and are permanently engaged in a kind of elaborate game with the criminals. Policemen who are vicious, violent, or unfair in their dealings with criminals (Harding frequently presents himself as being set up for jobs he didn't commit) are described in much the same way as the hooligans. When the rules are clearly set out and faithfully followed, as in the control of street betting which is discussed in one of the best chapters in the book, then both sides are relaxed. Failure to observe the etiquette of a district, though, can take odd forms, as when a policeman new to the division is "bleeding idiot" enough to try to arrest some men for playing Crown and Anchor. He is beaten up, and Harding, full of indignation, comes to his help: "Afterwards I got quite friendly with him."

## Blood and thunder

By George Spaight

PAUL SHERIDAN:  
Penny Theatres of Victorian London  
100pp. Dennis Dobson. £5.95.  
0 224 72104 9

In the hierarchy of nineteenth-century metropolitan entertainment, far below even the minor theatres and the free and easier, but the penny theatres. Here, in barely converted shops or warehouse cellars, were framed several times a night to witness battered fragments of sensational melodramas enacted by wretched performers who were as poverty-stricken as their patrons.

Although descriptions of these entertainments are to be found in Victorian sociological literature, this is the first book devoted to the subject. It is a reprint, almost in full, of the accounts by James Grant, James Greenwood, Henry Mayhew, and Blanchard Jerrold that will already be familiar to most students of popular Victorian theatre, but Paul Sheridan has also unearthed a number of less familiar accounts, notably from newspaper cuttings and from the writings of George Godwin, which help to fill out the picture.

Although Sheridan quotes a number of accounts which contradict the generally hostile tone of most Victorian writing on the subject, he has swallowed hook, line and sinker the general view that these entertainments were, in the words of contemporaries, "nurseries for juvenile thieves" and "a platform to teach the cruellest debauchery." But this is to put things the wrong way round. The children at the

He was a nice chap, rough sort of man, more like a docker than a policeman. Friendly or not, realistically or not, the police, magistrates, even judges, are referred to with that air of intimate familiarity to be found in any large, professional body of men with very different individual ambitions but sharing, basically, the same values.

The atmosphere the *East End Underworld* evokes of a small, highly structured, tightly intermeshed world, is at its most vivid in the brief vignettes that Harding excels at. They are rarely more than a few lines long yet they convey a very real sense of how people establish themselves within a community and how they are remembered by it. Harding sketches people, not by telling their life stories, but by highlighting one of their characteristics or experiences. Often it is a family occupation: "Billy Warner was a Diddy, a gipsy that had settled down. His father and his uncle used to play the 'Crown and Anchor,' going about with the boards."

Sometimes it is an admired skill: "We had a marvellous maker called Simms. It was the greatest secret where he made them. No one knew where he lived. I used to meet him in the street, and at a different place each time. He was the finest maker of coins you ever saw. He used to make old 2s pieces." Extravagant habits and strange deaths are powerful aids to memory, especially when combined, as in Mills the successful lino salesman: "He got killed up in Walton Street one day by a chap who hit him in the jaw. He earned so much money that he drank a bottle of whisky a day." Others are remembered for their character: "Callaghan got two years. He had been a cabinet-maker and a family man but one of the Simpsons hit him on the head with a hammer and that turned him crooked."

The Arthur Harding who can recall people like that is irresistible. If, sometimes, his experience seems slightly out of focus or lacking substance, this is hardly surprising, given Harding's age, circumstances, and the way these "chapters" of his life have been retrieved from an obscure past. *East End Underworld* is, after all, a shared venture: it is now up to Harding's editor to tell the rest of the story.



It is presumed that these Federal Prohibition agents—one bearded like a Marx Brothers aviator, the other on trial in the style of Some Like It Hot—were only allowed into the speakeasies they raided in such obvious disguise because the nobles thought they wanted to drink, not make arrests incognito. This 1921 photograph is taken from *The World's Great News Photos 1840-1980*, selected and edited by Craig T. Norbeck and Melvin Gray (210pp. New York: Crown Publishers. \$14.95.) which begins with the first daguerreotype and includes more than 200 pictures of the memorable events of over a century.

## Among the night people

By Robert Bernard Martin

NORMAN GREENBERG:  
The Man with a Steel Guitar.  
A Portrait of Ambition, Desperation and Crime.  
165pp. University Press of New England. £6.50.  
0 87451 175 5

In the Wallace Stevens poem whose title is echoed in *The Man with a Steel Guitar*, the world is changed by the artistry of the blue guitar, but in this haunting book nothing is transformed, and the shadowless earth remains flat and bare. It is more like Edward Hopper than that of Stevens, and those who people it seem as anonymous and nearly as mute as the hunched figures Hopper glimpsed through the murky windows of sleazy lodging-houses and deserted cafés.

"Warren Hart" (even the narrator has a pseudonym) is forty-three at the end of the book, having run through dozens of jobs or rackets to last a decent other people's lifetime, but he might as well never have lived at all. Except for a brief postscript, his story is a transcription of tape recordings made in prison, where he was serving a term for armed robbery. Norman Greenberg has pieced his words together, to read like a novel told in the first person. The course of his life is one of meaningless entropy: only at water turns downhill or the universe moves inexorably to disorder is there a pattern or cause recognizable to Hart, and the reader sees little more.

Hart's childhood as one of seven brothers and sisters reared by violent and alcoholic parents must have been appalling, but he endearingly remembers it with affection for its fun and warmth. "Overall, it was a real happy childhood. There was a lot of love, security, a lot of hard work and discipline." But it is his parents' love and discipline that makes his life so tolerable. All his adult life becomes an attempt to find a family to replace the one he has imagined from his own childhood, as he moves unthinkingly from baseball team to Evangelical mission, to union organizing, to country-style

band, to membership in a gang of thieves, finally to the community of prison, all the while begetting children and contracting "marriages" (apparently never divorcing the last woman before marrying the next). So far as one can tell from the book, he is a moderately intelligent man, partly self-educated, certainly admirably charitable and uncompaining, and a first-rate performer upon the steel guitar.

The world he inhabits is that of night-people with no fixed address, in which many of the chief "characters" are never referred to by name, as if it were not worth learning their identities, since they will inevitably vanish from sight. In remembering the single love affair on which he looks back with pride, he has trouble even recalling its end. "I don't know what happened. Oh, yes. We lost contact with each other. We didn't realize that we couldn't always be able to get hold of each other, and she had to go back to Arkansas, where her home was. . . . It didn't bother me, and I forgot it." Although cars are not often mentioned specifically, this is a civilization of ancient jalopies in which one moves blindly from one featureless town to another, fecklessly believing that things must get better.

The lack of geographic connections is only an oversize indication of Hart's inability to connect the events of his life, never seeing that his own childhood has anything to do with his adult desertion of his first wife, and his desertion of them is related to the thrashings inflicted on the children by their mother and her lover, who finally beat his daughter to death. Hart is a deeply pathetic man, and his story is harrowing, but his lack of awareness keeps this from being the documentary of "contemporary American life and sentiment" that his author claims it to be. Of his drive to prison, Hart says, "I can't remember thinking anything or feeling anything, just watching the towns I had known since childhood. The nightmarish playin' itself out."

The last sentence, brief and preposterous as it is, may indeed have been spoken by Hart, but it seems out of key with the rest of his speech, and it points to the unease that the reader occasionally feels. Who is the real author of the book,

and whose words finally are the ones which seem to have been spoken in recorder? Norman Greenberg is a sociologist and criminologist, and both his preface and the foreword to the book's importance as a sociological work, uncovering the roots of crime. In their fifty hours of interview Greenberg repeatedly suggested to Hart what he ought to have felt at a particular time, and in editing the tapes he rearranged or eliminated much of the material, always expanding many of Hart's answers. The result, for all we can tell, is as much what he expected to say as what was implicit in Hart's history.

After *In Cold Blood* and *The Executioner's Song*, where Capote and Mailer merged fiction and fact, we might have expected sociology to appear in the form of a novel. The inherent difficulty, however, is that all sciences, even those calling themselves "social," ultimately depend upon factual reliability. To achieve a facsimile of that, Greenberg, who is surely the ultimate narrator of the book, tries deliberately to "eliminate" himself and eliminate his own questions and comments, to make the story as simple as possible. The result is already so startling that Ayub Khan himself had started at it in open amazement. "While newspaper headlines marched towards war, I

What's more, Naseem helps initiate affairs of state. It is his cry that the Marathi language demands strikers take up in February 1957 as they clash with the Gujarati marines: "to the tune of my little rhyme the first of the language riots got under way, fifteen killed, over three hundred wounded. In this way I became directly responsible for triggering off the violence (which culminated in the partition of the state of Bombay)." At the age of eleven, the novel is dated as October 7, 1958 (the date of the partition of India).

Salman Rushdie has been taught, of course, by Günter Grass that the more insistently weird the narrator's point of view the more memorable (and subversive of officials' and politicians' versions) such personalizations of history tend to become. And the discipline, if anything, more energetic than his master in assembling contorted viewpoints: under the carpet history as Nadir Khan the poet is stashed away below grandfather's floor; the sniffling out of "odours of history" by a family endowed with truly gnostic conks (in comparison with this epic of nasal afflictions, of smog and goo, sinuses and sneezes, the Shandylion tale of noses is altogether thin-looking); and the chutneying of memory, the unpacking of history from each chapter's pickle-jar by Saleem, chutney-maker-in-chief at the Baramunda pickle works.

## Nosing out the Indian reality

By Valentine Cunningham

SALMAN RUSHDIE:  
*Midnight's Children*  
445pp. Cape. £6.95.  
0 224 01823 X

India is so big, so crowded, so jammed full of the fascinating particular, so awfully representative of human variety, that a novel pretending to India as subject can't avoid the question of how novels in general may claim truthfully to cope with the daunting vastnesses, the multiplicities of things and persons. What makes *Midnight's Children* so extraordinary (for literary importance isn't always matched by a fetching readability), what makes it so vertiginously exciting a reading experience, is the way it takes in not just the whole apple of India and the problem of being a novel about India but also, and this with the unflagging zest of a *Tristram Shandy*, the business of being a novel at all. "Is this an Indian disease, this urge to encapsulate the whole of reality?" speculates writing narrator Saleem Sinai. No, he implies, by way of reply, it's a novelist's disease; but one to be opened up, for inspection, foregrounded as they say, nowhere more aptly and revealingly than in an ambitious fiction of India.

Saleem Sinai, born on the mid-night stroke that gave India her independence, is thus as old as the India he seeks to describe. "Your life, which will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own," So Nehru wrote to him. "In what sense?" Naseem wonders. Well, for a start, Saleem's personal history keeps coinciding with his nation's ("Such historical coincidences have littered, and which befouled, my family's footsteps in the world"). While Naseem sashays in at sunset, thus slowing down the movements of the world by obliging it to travel around the Cape of Good Hope, my sister was also lying to impede our progress: by setting fire to the family's shoes. "While parliamentarians poured out speeches about 'Chinese aggression' and the blood of our martyred heroes, my eyes began to stream with tears; while the nation puffed itself up, convincing itself that the humiliation of the little yellow men was at hand, my sinuses, too, puffed up and distorted as Ayub Khan himself had started at it in open amazement." While newspaper headlines marched towards war, I

Wing; and thees horrible stained left cheek, the West! Remember, stupid boys: Pakistan ees a stain on the face of India!" In his head rages the "polyglot frenzy" of "All-India Radio"—the voices, telepathically assembled, of the five-hundred-plus survivors of the little crowd of Independence babies, the other *Midnight's Children* ("babbled in every dialect, from the purity of Lucknow Urdu to the Southern sturrings of Tamil"). His imagination besieged by the onslaught of Indian detail, he is sunk in the multiplied particularities of his vivid surroundings. Not least, in the pangs to which his great schnozzle ("See here—the Deccan peninsula hanging down!") is peculiarly susceptible:

The mournful decaying fumes of animal faeces in the gardens of the Frere Road museum, the putrid body odours of young men in loose pajamas holding hands in Sadar evenings, the knife-sharpness of expectorated betel-nut and the bitter-sweet commingling of betel and opium: "rocket pans" were sniffed out in the hawker-crowded alleys between Elphinstone Street and Victoria Road. Camel-smeets, car-smeets, the gut-like irritation of motor-rickshaw fumes, the aroma of contraband cigarettes and "black-money", the competitive effluvia of the city's bus-drivers and the simple sweat of their sardine-crowded passengers. . . . Mosques poured over me the lit of devotion; I could smell the rotund emissions of power sent out by flag-waving Army motors; in the very hoardings of the cinemas I could discern the cheap tawdry perfumes of imported spaghetti Westerns and the most violent martial-arts films ever made.

For a time, declares Saleem of his scotterized olfactory forays at the age of sixteen among the stinks of Karachi, he was "like a drugged person, my head reeling beneath the complexities of smell; but then my overpowering desire for truth asserted itself, and I survived." If Indians are, as he says, "obsessed with correspondences", "Similarities between this and that, between apparently unconnected things, make us clap our hands delightedly when we find them out. It is a sort of national longing for form"—then Saleem's narrative exhibits the national craving in super-abundance. It writes history, we might say by way of compliment, on the Walter Benjamin model, spinning webs of meaning around peppercorns and bicycles, spittoons and Urdu. Chandi's parted hair ("it was like a picture of a woman's hair, but the country's corrupt 'black' economy had grown as large as the official, white' variety, which he did by showing me a newspaper photograph of Mrs Ghandi. Her hair, parted in the centre, was snow-white on one side and black on the other"; "if the Mother of the Nation had had a coiffure of uniform pigment, the Emergency she spawned might easily have lacked a darker side"). In this mode, the eldest squirt of boy-jugglers is granted powerful significance as he brought into alliance with the three faith-destroying drops of blood falling from Saleem's grandfather's nose when it strikes an unfriendly tussack beneath his prayer-mat, with the three drops spilling his grandfather's marital sheet, with the blood of Saleem's mutilations as he loses a hair-tuft and a finger, with the political colour of Qasim the Red and the Red Magicians and Saleem's mother's blushes over her Red lover. . . . not to mention the heaped-up carpet of old friends in a (pickled) field near Dacca, the going-on in Sanjay's vasectomy tent.

India, we keep being informed, is myth, fiction, theatre; every Indian writes and enacts his own variant readings. As Saleem says of his chum Cyrus-the-great, the nuclear physicist's son turned by a religious clairvoyant into Lord Krishna, Krishna roved, "India's richest, purest, most vivid, 'cheapest-book'-reading American: gungahs: 'There are as many versions of India as Indians; and, when set beside Cyrus's India, my own version seems almost mundane.' So, in a novel packed with visionaries, magicians, illusionists, contortionists and people like Picture Singh and Das the peepshow man who urge you to take a dekho at things "history, in my version". He composes his own sentences, in one very memorable episode, out of bits of newspaper headlines: he is cutting up history.

Pickling is preserving, insists Saleem, offering a Grass-like analogy between cooking and writing, even if, like the cooking of books, pickling is also altering:

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To pickle is to give immortality, after all: fish, vegetables, fruit hang embalmed in spice-and-vinegar; a certain alteration, a slight intensification of taste, is a small matter, surely? . . . One day, perhaps, the world may taste the pickles of history. They may be too strong for some palates, their smell may be overpowering, tears may rise to the eyes: I hope nevertheless that it will be possible to say of them that they possess the authentic taste of truth.

Even the Bombay film industry, whose stars, producers, taboos and awful melodramatic excesses keep recurring in this cinema-obsessed narrative, can speak true. Through the window of Bombay's Pioneer Cafe, hangout of film-extras and Communists, Saleem watches the hands of his mother and lover dancing the kind of discreet sex-substitute choreography of the film censors, "always at last jerking back, fingertips avoiding fingertips, because what I'm watching here on my dirty glass cinema-screen is, after all, an Indian movie, in which physical contact is forbidden lest it corrupt the watching flower of Indian youth". A Bombay movie, but a moment of truth.

The more extravagantly mythicized and openly fictional, then, the more memorable and truthful: it's a set of notions (and ones intrinsic, of course, to literary modernism) that Rushdie has Saleem constantly assert and exemplify. India's history is presented as a matter, in the Jamesian formula, of making and making-out of writing and reading, of language and its arts: "I grant, much mastery of the multiple gifts of cooking and language is rare indeed, yet a possess it." The language itself, it's implied in the novel's Joycean "Abracadabra" chapter, fathers: "Abba" (Father) "Maddaba": "It's Naseem's son's 'awesome first word'. Saleem dwells on how his life has been written in advance, as it were, in the syllables of his family name, Sinai. And his father India as he writes it out, the narrator whose birth, was the birth of his nation; his pencil equated with his penis, his (pickled) unclipped cord likened to the pointing finger of "The Boyhood of Raleigh" reproduction that haunted his childhood ("a prophecy of another flight not dissimilar from itself, whose entry into my story would release the dreadful logic of Alpha and Omega"). His nose is a dictionary-maker ("a lexicographer of the nose, I travelled Burder Road").

Master at it or not, though, Saleem finds cooking the books hard going. His audience, the illiterate Padma, named for the "Dung Goddess", is

always restive, critical, a bit stupid, prone to flouncing and annoyance, an awkwardly choric cruder and squarer of the tale. She stands for the intransigencies of the material Saleem is striving to memorialize. It keeps falling apart, like himself, fissured, shredding in a world of frayed ghosts, of dogs that chew and dismember and of bombs that fragment. And objects that do remain whole tend to comprise puzzling holes, rebarbative absences. They're containers made of gaps: emptied pickle-jars, an opened trunk, spittoons, a washing-chest, a car-boot, a "thunderbox", the magician's "cryptic basket" in which Saleem finally escapes from Pakistan. And, of course, there's the most telling parade of sheets with holes in them: the perforated sheet behind which Saleem's grandmother was medically inspected and ardently wooed by her doctor, and the one which shelters sister Jamila as she performs her songs chastely and almost invisibly in public. These holed sheets are "ophore" (one of the novel's favourite babu joke words) only for dedicated voyeurs. They enforce a vision of fragmentariness apt to a partitioned India but dismaying for that ("gradually Aziz came to have a picture of Naseem in his mind, a badly-fitted collage of her severally-inspected parts. This phantasm of a partitioned woman . . ."). They stand inevitably for the sheets of paper on which Saleem is assembling a stubbornly bitty India.

It's a remarkably dextrous performance. But if the granting of the Indian text so high a degree of self-consciousness were all, *Midnight's Children* might be a dismissable (at a pinch admittedly, for 350,000 words are not all that easily got rid of) as a smart refurbishing of bits of Sterne and James, of *Heart of Darkness* and *Finnegans Wake*, by courtesy of Deconstructionism out of Wolfgang Iser. That would, of course, be a

harsh judgment, for this is an extremely gamey, not to say very large, instance of its engaging kind. But it has even more going for it: for its play of signifiers, of textualities, its drama of the reading and writing of India, is bolted firmly into its fierce political despairs and indignations.

India's divisions have always been, it's explained, linguistic ones. But language riots of the sort Saleem sparked did actually happen. The mirages and mysteries of India's text are also the airborne Mirages and Mystères that India and Pakistan hurled at each other. The Battle of Lahore is presented, like everything else, as being difficult to read—who precisely did what to whom?—but such a battle did in fact occur. The spectacular emptyings of family trunk and treasured spittoon, the amnesia and numbness of Saleem, the burying of people's memories and ending of their stories all fall into their logical place in the novel's trading in absentee information; but they come also as the climax of an Indo-Pakistani war of recent memory. Just so, the bad smells of corruption, despotism and carnage that Saleem sniffs out so keenly are not just part of an enticing nasality myth; they're meant also to touch politicians where it hurts (it's Saleem as human tracker-dog on the Bhutto side, for instance, who leads the enemy troops to "Sheikh Mujib's lair"). And when the "labia-flipped" clones of Sanjay, gleefully vasectomizing and hysterectomizing, turn out also to be testecutizers who cut off Saleem's pencil- penis, we're granted a climax again, for any Five Act Play of Signifiers. But it's also a climax that has been and is—and it's as much a part of the distinction of *Midnight's Children* as anything else about it that it impresses this on us—undenably Deconstructionism out of Wolfgang Iser. That would, of course, be a

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**JOHN MURRAY**







# No room at the top

By Robert Blake

PATRICK COSGRAVE:

R. A. Butler: An English Life  
167pp. Quarter. £6.95.  
0 7043 2258 7

Biographies of living people, for obvious reasons, seldom come off. Papers are not available, perspective is difficult enough, the past twelve months have succeeded despite these perils. Even more oddly, one was about Harold Macmillan, and the other is about "Rab" Butler—two strangely antipathetic characters whose careers on the top level of high Conservative politics have been entwined for so many years. The late George Hutchinson wrote a brief, excellent and perceptive study of Macmillan last year. Patrick Cosgrave has produced an even better book on Rab. Clearly a biography of less than 150 pages can only be a prologue to the major work being written by Anthony Howard, who is Butler's "official" biographer. But this presumably will not appear during its subject's lifetime and since one wishes Lord Butler many more years of active retirement, one hopes that Mr Cosgrave's book will hold the field for a long while. There is not likely to be a better interim study, nor one more sympathetic and perceptive.

Cosgrave deserves all the more praise because he is not himself naturally inclined to approve of the strand in the Conservative tradition which Lord Butler has always represented—a cautious, middle-of-the-road, low-key pragmatism. To quote the last sentence of the book:

This biographer, who has less than full sympathy with the views and policies that Lord Butler has stood for, must, however, bend in admiration to his steadfastness, and even wish that the charge of the country, at a crucial point in its life, had been put into his less than flashy hands.

The key problem in Butler's career is why he failed to become Prime Minister. Of course there are many other aspects of his political life to consider: his major work on the 1944 Education Act; his contribution to the Conservative revival in 1950-51; his brilliant tactical handling of the dissolution of the Central African Federation in 1963—so tactful that he did not even annoy Sir Roy Welensky, whose threshold of annoyance with British ministers was generally very low. But all these aspects are overshadowed by a major question mark. What was it that prevented a statesman of such proven ability in high office and with such long record of loyal service to his party from reaching the top? There are other twentieth-century examples of men who were *payable* but did not become popes: Joseph Chamberlain, Curzon, Austen Chamberlain, Ernest Bevin. But the explanation in each instance is not difficult to discover. In the case of Butler it is, and there is still a constant flow of guesswork and speculation on the subject many years after the event.

It is, I think, may be one of the reasons. There has never been any malice about Butler, never a flicker of poetry in his careful, quiet, often deliberately opaque prose. It was not that he was incapable of hitting. Out of Labour, Cosgrave quotes an excellent estimate from his speech at the Conservative Conference in October 1963:

What nonsense it is to accept, as inevitable and right, the so-called swing of the pendulum. If we accept uncritically the theory of "it's time for change"—still more if we regard government as a sort of cricket match, when each side must have its innings in turn—then we may be condemned for ever to an alternation between sensible and silly policies. After all, if the allies can always be sure of re-election if they wait long enough, then there is no compulsion on them to make themselves sensible.

These are impeccable Tory sentiments of which Margaret Thatcher would entirely approve, but she would not have used this sort of language on that of all occasions, if she had been, as Butler was, a candidate for the leadership stakes suddenly made wide open by the illness of the Prime Minister. The Conference wanted a Carlton call, not a cool appeal to reason. Yet, although a certain element of showmanship is valuable in the television age to which Rab, unlike Eden and Macmillan, never quite adjusted himself, it is not indispensable. There is very little of the theatre in the composition of either Edward Heath or James Callaghan, but that deficiency did not stop them getting to the top. What else, then, stopped Rab?

Cosgrave rightly discounts the view that it was anything to do with his role as the Foreign Office spokesman for appeasement in 1938, although in one of the best chapters of the book he shows how skilfully Butler's own account of that episode in *The Art of the Possible* underplays his very strong support of the policy—symbolized by appointing, of all people, as his parliamentary private secretary, "Chips" Channon, one of the most rabid admirers of Neville Chamberlain. It is true that in 1957 Butler was passed over for a strong anti-appeasement, but six years later, when he was again passed over, the winner, Lord Home, far from being opposed to appeasement, had been Chamberlain's parliamentary secretary at the time of Munich. The truth is that the issue had become irrelevant long before 1957.

Another explanation beloved by trendy journalists of the time, was "class". In 1957 Winston Churchill advised the Queen to send for Macmillan. Eden who, contrary to the claims of some ignoramuses, was certainly consulted, also probably recommended Macmillan, though we cannot be sure of this. The Cabinet was polled through Lords Salisbury and Kilmuir and the Tory MPs and peers through the Whips, but it was Lord Salisbury, representative of one of the oldest and grandest Tory families in England, who conveyed the party's advice to the Queen. It was thus easy to manufacture the myth of a conspiracy by the establishment—by an inner circle or, as it was termed after the war, looked like a repeat performance in 1963, a "magic" circle—of old Etonian and Harrovian grandees to exclude a "middle-class" product of Marlborough. This was sorry stuff even at the time.

In fact there is no reason to doubt that in 1957 a party election would have produced the same result as the arcane procedure which the party still clung to. Butler, as Cosgrave rightly argues, did not miss the premiership because he was pro-appeasement or anti-Suez or "middle-class" (a particularly ridiculous argument to use about someone just as "grand" socially as Macmillan). He missed it because, unlike other Conservative ministers who doubted, with discretion, the wisdom of "Suez", he doubted it with the maximum of indecision—in particular at a dinner with twenty Conservative MPs who did not forget his scathing observations about the conduct of a Cabinet from which he had not seen fit to resign.

If he had refused to serve under Macmillan in 1957 Butler would have lost totally. In 1963 the situation was very different. His chances were much better and, if Macmillan had not used every device from his stock-book to prevent Butler's succession, he might well have won the day. The story of this episode, as it goes by, becomes more and more disturbing. One can only be glad that its reversals produced the major change in procedure initiated by Lord Home—an electoral system under which justice or injustice is not only done but is seen to have been done. In 1963, unlike 1957, the party vote might well have chosen Butler. Even under the existing conventions, his position was such that he could have prevented Home from becoming

Prime Minister by refusing to serve under him; and then the position would have been his, for, whatever the doubts of some MPs, they would surely have rallied to his support at that critical moment. Lord Home only barely lost the 1964 election, despite the "grouse moor image" and the "magic circle" and the refusal of Iain Macleod and Enoch Powell to serve under him. Rab would almost certainly have won it, and the political history of Britain might have been very different if he had.

History is full of "ifs" and there is no point in speculating too much about them. Butler was a non-resigner, and party politics would be impossible if the great majority of politicians did not and do not take the same view as he did. Nevertheless there are moments when people should refuse to serve, despite the perils and the obloquy.

His idea—his ideal—of service, though it encompassed putting plans and policies in a reasonably popular form, did not include going all out for R. A. Butler. He had (and, I think, has) no conception of how much his decision not to fight meant to people like Macleod, Powell and Aldington, not to mention many much humbler party servants.

This is a perceptive comment. One can let people down in certain circumstances as much by not resigning as by resigning. Butler's failure to appreciate the loyalty of his supporters—a by-product of his curious remoteness and his ungracious distaste for the smoking-room of the House of Commons—was one of his political defects. It fits with that ambiguity, circular wit and obscurity of utterance which have so often puzzled his friends as much as his enemies. However, politicians, like all of us, have only one life to live, and a person who prefers domesticity, reading and painting to drinks, cigars and gossip cannot be morally censured.

There was another difficulty and Cosgrave sums it up in this passage:

Butler has always managed to raise doubt, suspicion and dislike wherever he has gone. This is not merely a matter of criticism of him for, say, his stand on appeasement, or for his apparent disloyalty during the Suez operation . . . It is, rather, a profound suspicion of something in the man that his enemies (and even his milder critics) seem not altogether to be able to define. Of course many have resented (and have had cause to resent) the sharpness of his tongue, or his undoubted intellectual arrogance, his apparent detachment from ordinary concerns, his lofty air, his occasional verbal cruelty, his many indiscretions, smoothed over and blotted out in his book. But even the sum of all these things does not convey the total effect which, again and again, has ensured a solid body of backbench Conservative opinion opposed to Butler, and not all of them by any means on the right of the party.

Perhaps one need go no further in order to explain his failure to become Prime Minister. People did not know quite why they disliked the late Dr Fell, but they knew that they disliked him—and that was enough.

Mr Cosgrave's book is not without defects. There are factual errors and sentences which suggest over-hasty writing or inadequate proof-reading. Macmillan's "night of the long knives" in July 1962 preceded, not succeeded, the Vassall and Prolongo affairs and de Gaulle's veto. And what on earth is meant by saying that Butler "would have won the 1964 election shortly after the Conservative defeat" which he retired to Trinity? There is, moreover, no index—a deficiency which even in a short book should not be tolerated by any publisher—and there are no references. Nevertheless, this is an acute and sensitive study of one of the most intriguing political figures of our day. It is not the last word there may never be one—but it is a very illuminating first word.

## Il Palazzo di Paranoia

After thirty years to have no real home. No deeds, mortgage, front gate, not to be recognized by any territorial claim. Set up by proprietariness or frequency Of looking, devoid of that weight of stone True possessors draw with them when they step. I stroke books and records for my ownership.

My movements now the code of a coma. My company is those who've gone away: The ageing self's a bitter-sweet aroma. Comfortable, petulant, fond of delay. And then the devils round recurring corners. How they swarm at parties, with their buzz Of beds and love, who doesn't and who does.

Once I had two cats to harmonise The wearing carpets and the darkening walls. Two children and one cat perhaps are fits Enough when my morning self recalls Regular suzerainty behind the eyes Of golden swarms and mimic histories: I seem to rise from sleep on heeded knees.

Home again to threaten trappings, news From the normal waiting with stacked plates To raise a regiment. But you can refuse If you have seen the Seasons and the Fates Trussed on walls, whose clutch of clues Is scattered idly in that great surround Of dreams; you can be always out of town.

Miles out at that Palace where frescoes dance And the Cabbala, the Muses and the Months Offer such flattering significance To things unthought and things that happened once— There one with the profile of an Estense Prince Shows you the estate and inks you to The room where death is waiting up for you.

Peter Porter

## Grandmother

Rises before the first bird. Slugs about In gale-sized alpacas. Soothe the antinous whine Of the washing-machine with small lousous whine Collected from our room. Whacks up the tilted. Restores a lost blanket. Firmly ignores, With total grace, you nakedness. And mine.

At seven the kitchen's a lit quarter-deck. She gullotomus salami with a hand Veined like Silesia. Deals black, ramp bread. Ingots of butter, cheese, eggs, grenade-strong. Thinks, loudly, in ground German. Sends a long And morning glance across anonymous crops To where the autobahn, fluent with cars, Spoils north to Frankfurt, and unpromised land.

The clock, carted from Prague, hazards an hour. A neighbour's child appears, failed priest at eight In shirt and table-runner; ruptures mass From *Hänsel and Gretel*. Does his holy best To trip her. Fleches sugar, sausage. Spoils Her apron-strings. She lets it all go by With the same shrug she gave when the burnt ear Refused to let us vamp it into life. And her to church. Perhaps it was the same In Hitler's thirdest: the Sudeben farm Left in a moment, and her history Carried in paper bags beneath each arm.

Her face is like a man's: a Roman back. Casey might quail at and the equal, square frame An icon of compassion. As she turns Towards the leaning light, behind her eye Burn embers of Europe's foul alchemy. Her body bears its harsh stigmas, dug With easy instruments of blood and bone. And still, I'm certain, she could up and stick A yelling pig, a pris, a parisian With equal mercy. Or a lack of it. She's wise as standing stones. Her gift of years Almost persuades belief in God, the Devil. Their parallel uncages. Both heaven and hell Entirely unprepared for her arrival.

Charles Causley

# The longing for belonging

By Patrick McCarthy

ANNIE COHEN-SOLAL:  
Paul Nizan  
Communist impossible  
Avec la collaboration de Henriette Nizan  
288pp. Paris: Grasset.  
2 262 5341 1  
FASCAL ORY:  
Nizan  
Destin d'un révolté, 1905-1940  
331pp. Paris: Ramsay.  
2 83956 188 9

When Paul Nizan broke with the French Communist Party after the Nazi-Soviet pact he became a non-person. Even while it vilified him as a traitor, a police spy and a fascist the party also denied that he had ever existed. Nizan remained a non-person until 1960 when Jean-Paul Sartre, who had supported the Communists during the Cold War but had broken with them after the Russian invasion of Hungary, resurrected his old friend by writing an enthusiastic introduction to a new edition of Nizan's pamphlet *Aden Arabie*. The book sold well, Nizan's other books were re-issued and he was much admired by the young militants of May '68. In the 1970s his novels were turned into television films and now he is the subject of these two long books.

Annie Cohen-Solal and Pascal Ory both analyse Nizan's life, his writing and his political evolution. Cohen-Solal's book is fuller because she was helped in its preparation by Nizan's wife, Rirette Alpha. But both critics are thoroughly competent and there is only one important difference of interpretation between them.

Neither is able to explain the great turn of Nizan's early life: his relationship with his father. Nizan's grandfather was a Breton farmer who went to work on the railway and his father became a railway engineer. The family ascended into the middle classes but during the First World War the engineer made a mistake in the fabrication of shells and was brutally demoted. Betrayed by the class he so admired, he grew moody, washed for nights on end and talked about suicide. It remains unclear how this influenced Nizan's behaviour towards his son but certainly the young Nizan was filled with rage against the middle classes and haunted by death.

Sartre, who met Nizan at the lycée Henri IV and moved on to the Ecole Normale, describes this obsession: "Nizan used to see himself as a corpse . . . he would jump up with his eyes full of worms and vanish. The next day we would find him dead." Nizan was a crowd of strangers. Sartre and Nizan were united by their determination never to be fooled. Their cynicism shocked Simone de Beauvoir, for they mocked not merely families and the flag but also idealism, sincerity and morality. To them men were minds but bodies wrecked with needs and cast adrift in a brutal universe.

In 1924 Nizan went off to Aden, where he worked for an English trader and thought seriously about becoming a businessman. When he returned he found two deplorable things: the "quadruple" of the world war, the "triple" of the Jewish century. He was not for me to disengage, being perhaps even more important logical positivist than Olivier Todd, but only to express surprise that anyone should ever have thought otherwise. I am even fuller in my applause for Todd's suggestion that the defenders of pure French were making a mistake in fighting against the *franglais* of vocabulary rather than against the *franglais* of philosophical thought.

My enthusiasm for this book is not shared by Todd's erstwhile journalist colleagues on *Le Nipote Observateur*. Under the rather neat title "On the Revolt" (Todd makes it clear that he

took its share of the vote dropped to 9 per cent, while Stalin urged his French comrades to be aggressively working-class, anti-intellectual and sectarian. Yet this hard line suited Nizan because it offered him a vehicle for his hatred of the middle classes. He published his vitriolic pamphlets—*Aden Arabie* (1931) and *Les Chiens de garde* (1932)—became a full-time party worker and in 1934 he went off to Moscow.

The Soviet Union disappointed him in only one respect: he discovered that in the Marxist utopia people were still afraid of death. While he was there the Communist line changed. Shocked by Hitler's rise to power and by the riots of February 1934, Stalin began to look for allies. In France the Communists and the Socialists started the discussions which led to the Popular Front.

This new period suited Nizan just as well as the old. The party's cultural policy was to welcome fellow-travellers and all anti-Fascists. Nizan heaped praise on Gide, at least until Gide dared to criticize the Soviet Union in his *Retour de URSS*. When the party discovered that Marxism and religion were no longer incompatible Nizan was sent to talk to Dominicans.

Cohen-Solal argues that he was already unhappy with the party but she is not convincing, and one tends to agree with Ory, who thinks these were good years for Nizan. He was ambitious and he sometimes felt that the party did not recognize his merits. He fell foul of Aragon, who had become the great Communist writer and wanted no rivals. But Nizan's

books were praised by Communist reviewers and translated into Russian, and he wrote regularly in the party papers *L'Humanité* and *Ce Soir*.

In the summer of 1939 Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir met Nizan in Marseille. He was in an exuberant mood and he told them there was no risk of war; the British-French-Russian alliance was too strong for Hitler. Nizan went off on holiday to Corsica, where he read in the newspapers about the Nazi-Soviet pact. On September 25, after the invasion of Poland, he published a letter announcing his resignation from the party.

His reasons were complex. He declared to his wife that he understood why Stalin had signed the pact but that the French Communists should not have approved it. Communism could not flourish in France, Nizan declared correctly, unless it was nationalistic. Moreover the need to defend Russia did not justify Stalin's invasion of eastern Poland. These were logical reasons but Nizan was also guided by his tempestuous nature. The party to which he had given so much had betrayed him.

He put the full force of his rage into defiance. When his old comrades denounced him and tried to persuade his wife to leave him, Nizan, who was now in the army, remained glacial. He was a Communist, he declared, but not a party member. One can only guess what his subsequent political course would have been because he was killed in May 1940. He was acting as interpreter for a British regiment which was retreating towards

Dunkirk when a stray bullet struck him in the head.

Sartre did not forget Nizan and indeed the second half of his own life may be viewed as a replay of Nizan's. The need to find something solid and real in an empty universe drove Sartre to develop the concept of "situation" and then to take up politics. The PCF offered a concrete framework in which to act and a contact with the working class. Then, after years of uneasy collaboration with the French Communists, Sartre decided, like Nizan, that they were hopeless.

In his preface to *Aden Arabie*, Sartre describes Nizan's writings as a call to arms and certainly it is their violence that makes them live today. *Aden Arabie* and *Les Chiens de garde* are pamphlets in a long French tradition that can be right as well as left-wing. The first offers no serious analysis of colonialism. It is a diatribe against the city of London, merchants who swell gain at sundown and colonial ladies whose drawing-rooms are decorated with portraits of Queen Victoria who had, according to Nizan, "the small, pinched eyes of a drunkard". Similarly, *Les Chiens de garde* is not a sophisticated refutation of 1930s French philosophy. Nizan denounces the pretensions of philosophers: they are not objective, they have fat, expensively-dressed bodies as well as minds and their quest for the universal and the metaphysical is a way to disguise the class struggle. The French education system is a decaying corpse and the only hope lies in "the machine-guns of civil war". Out of the battle will come a new philosophy and a new man—Bolshevik man.

There is certainly plenty of evidence in his published work to suggest that Sartre was obsessed by the concept of fatherhood: the relationship between Hecate and Hugo in *Les Mots* and between old von Gerlach and Franz in *Les Séquestrés d'Altona*, the opening pages of *Les Mots* and of *L'Idiot de la Famille*, the essay on Paul Nizan. Olivier Todd's own quest for a father clearly struck an answering chord, though the story of his successful emancipation casts some doubts upon Sartre's insistence, in *Les Mots*, on presenting all sons as so many Aeneases carrying their Anchises permanently on their backs.

In February 1980, Raymond, Guy-Crozier, chaired a conference on Campus at Gainesville. The purpose of the second gathering was to measure the changes, for better or worse, that can be perceived in the almost uncontrollable body of Camus' *Le Mythe*. Sartre has edited a volume of the proceedings of the second conference, *Albert Camus 1980* (330pp. University Presses of Florida \$16. 08/30 0691 0), which includes contributions on "Problèmes de méthodologie", "Narration et fiction", "Théâtre", "Philosophie", and "Réception et biographie".

Un *fil rebelle* presents a fascinating account of this adoptive family, and of the way it together to produce *Les Temps Modernes*. We also catch a convincing glimpse of Simone de Beauvoir, looking an eye on Sartre's drinking, pursuing her lips at his obvious delight in discussing "les histoires de cul et de bordel", fulfilling in Todd's eyes the role of "the perfect nineteenth-century middle class wife, accepting all these female comets tottering round her husband because she knows she will survive them all". Walter Lewino suggests that the account of the men in the family—and especially of Sartre, Horkheimer and Francis Jeanson—is not exempt from the rancorous pettiness and aim, but we shall have to wait until the publication of their various *réceptions* to find out more about this, and to see whether Sartre

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## commentary

## The art of craft

By Gavin Stamp

Architect-Designers: Pugin to  
Mackintosh  
The Fine Art Society, 148 New Bond  
Street, W1.

There was, of course, nothing new in the Nineteenth Century about the idea of architects designing furniture and other domestic artefacts. Robert Adam, most conspicuously amongst many others, had earlier concerned himself with every detail of a room and its decoration and furniture. An architect was, and still ought to be, a resourceful and intelligent designer. But there was, during Victoria's reign, a great flowering of a particular strand in domestic design and it was dominated by architects. It began with the Gothic Revival, developed through the Arts and Crafts movement and produced some of the most attractive and distinctive objects of the period. Although this tradition was really the work of a particular and rather incestuous school of architects over several generations, historians have for years regarded it as the mainstream, and even at the time the South Kensington Museum deliberately acquired furniture by such men as Norman Shaw, William Burges and E. W. Godwin.

The history of the Victorian decorative arts, like the history of Victorian architecture itself, requires a study of pupillage and professional association, principally in a genealogy of architects' offices: Scott began Bodley and Street; Street began William Morris, Philip Webb, Norman Shaw and J. D. Sedding; Shaw began Lethaby and the founders of the Art Workers' Guild; Sedding began Gimson and Ernest Barnsley. Almost all designed furniture. But above all, there was the legacy of A. W. N. Pugin. Sedding's remark of 1888 always deserves repeating: "We should have had no Morris, no Street, no Shaw, no Webb, no Bodley, no Rossetti, no Burne-Jones, no Crane, but for Pugin".

On display in the Fine Art Society's elegant Bond Street gallery - where, like Victorian decorative art always, looks at home - is the work of all these architects and others, spread over sixty years. At first, the chairs, tables, sideboards, pianos and chests seem

utterly disparate in style and sophistication: the deliberately over-structured furniture of Street, the spiky, bulbous Aestheticism of Dresser and Talbot, the ponderous pieces designed like whole buildings by Eastlake and Seddon, and then the thin fin-de-siècle elegance of Voysey, Walton and Baillie Scott. It is good to see furniture by men such as Waterhouse and Seddon, so often thought of as hard-line Goths, but amongst the best are the inventive designs by E. W. Godwin - appropriately, for not only did he run off with Ellen Terry and father Edward Gordon Craig, but he also designed the Fine Art Society's entrance.

What unifies all these designs - including the metalwork, stained glass, wallpaper and posts - is a certain quality of expression, the determination of the designer to reflect the nature of the materials and to exploit the skill of the craftsman, which was a central tenet of the Gothic Revival. This is an attitude which differs from the modern view of the "crafts", as Clive Wainwright points out in his excellent introductory essay to the catalogue, on "The Architect and the Decorative Arts". The sentimental idea has arisen that an architect, a "paper designer", can inhibit the natural creativity of the craftsman, but in fact very few of the finest Arts and

Crafts objects were actually made by the hand of their designers. Webb, Ashbee, Gimson, even Morris, were essential understanding of the end processes and of the nature of materials came, in part, from their training as architects. The beauty, solidity and inventiveness of the objects on display is the result of great sophistication and not crude arty-craftiness - *pace* Ruskin.

A pity, therefore, that the exhibition ends with Charles Reanne Mackintosh. Not only does the successful line Pugin to Mackintosh rather imply the Germanic "pioneers" view of artistic progress towards modernity, but also the work of the great Glasgow designer actually betrays the principles of Pugin and Morris. When the work of the Glasgow School was shown in London for the first, and last, time by the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in 1898, it was criticized by the English as being too concerned with aesthetic effect and not enough with structural integrity. This was not just English conservatism. Although now highest of the highly priced, Mackintosh's work here seems crudely made and in poor shape compared with the furniture by his English contemporaries and predecessors. La tye, on the other hand, is not represented, yet the high standard of craftsmanship he maintained in his early vernacular houses was also reflected in his very inventive and witty designs for furniture - all too little known.

Downstairs can be found more Arts and Crafts: the exhibition of the work of C. R. Ashbee and the Guild of Handicraft, organized by Octenham Art Gallery and Museum. Ashbee's utopian vision of an organic community of craftsmen living in a Simple Life in Chipping Campden, far away from town and factory, is highly absurd and it is scarcely surprising that the Guild went bankrupt. But his Cockney craftsmen, decorated from the East End, nevertheless carried out Ashbee's designs so well that the result is some of the most exquisite metal work ever made.

The catalogue to this exhibition (162pp, and about 80 black-and-white plates) is available from the Fine Art Society at £3.50 plus postage.



Interior design, post-Mackintosh: a panel by Jean-Emile Laboureur in 1927, for the cocktail bar of his friend Marcel Boulestin's famous restaurant in Covent Garden. The restaurant (now newly decorated) had murals by Laboureur and Marie Laurencin and curtains by Raoul Dufy. An exhibition which tries to recreate something of its original atmosphere opens at Boulestin's (25 Southampton Row, WC2) on May 20 and moves to the Michael Parkin Gallery (11 Motcomb St, SW1X 8LB) on June 10.

## The found and the made

By Frances Spalding

Philip King  
Hayward Gallery

When sculpture turned renegade in the 1960s, abandoning traditional materials and methods for brightly coloured steel constructions, Philip King produced some of the most idiosyncratic works in the new idiom. Many of these are now brought together in the Hayward Gallery, where they greet the eye like enigmatic monoliths. Their simple geometry, strong colour and bland mood make them unlike gigantic toys, reflecting perhaps a period innocence and self-confidence. They are also robust and contained. They do not reveal their structural logic, and often the skin of paint applied to their surfaces disguises the nature of the material used. Their appeal is cerebral and intellectual rather than physical: they are dramatically present, but to the imagination rather than the senses.

The exact reverse is true of King's recent sculpture on the upper floor of the Hayward. Here, King's metal abuts on crude forms of plastic, wood or untreated wood, the found and the made together. The whole is bound together by heavy metal clamps, steel cables and heavy, aggressively visible nuts and bolts. The stacking, leaning, welding and

tying are made insistently apparent. Nor is the physicality of the work concealed by the application of a coat of gloss paint. The colours are those natural to the material, and what paint and texture has been applied only enhances its quality. One cannot look at this work without responding to its almost exaggerated energy, without being imaginatively involved in the balancing, crushing or sudden expansion of the parts. It is King's stated belief that sculpture is "a way of intensifying looking - offering to the spectator a new and fuller sense of what life is like to see and perhaps to be".

In his move away from image-making, King has progressively explored new ways of engaging the spectator. He still likes to offer a challenge, to leave the onlooker "without a second", as he admits, but the decision to expose the making, which to a large extent becomes the subject of the work, reflects an advance towards his audience and a retreat from enigma. For one who steadily presents abstract ideas about the nature of sculpture, his work is surprisingly experimental. The forty-two sculptures included in this retrospective are a fine example of the Hayward's commitment to the contemporary and the idiosyncratic.

From the flat, Philip King's approach was defined from the start. His new sculpture, which will open at the Hayward on June 10, is a

gestalt psychology and sought images that were readily perceivable in their entirety. His work has always invited literary associations. "Rosebud" - a pink cone with two undulating ribs disclosing a green interior - has lost none of its wit and in 1962 must have offered a saucy alternative to the abstract humanism of Henry Moore. "Brake" simulates sudden cessation of speed as rectangular fibre-glass panels collide, leaving one of them prostrate on the gallery floor. "Genghis Khan" rises hieratically against an end wall like a Dr Who monster, wings sprouting from its conical body and a lava-like train from its base.

Much of this early work has an insistent frontality and does not sustain interest in the round. When King split open the cone, on which several of his early pieces are based, and played out the parts around its empty centre, his work began to offer greater variety of viewpoint. Realizing that the viewer's eye would be attracted to the obvious "debt" to Matisse, King's sculptures began to explore in abstract terms the boundaries of the human figure. In "Span", the five column-like pieces painted a rich, glossy blue-black, ripple with red and white, the viewer's eye is drawn to the central core at the centre of the sculpture. It can only be reached imaginatively, as it is hemmed in on all sides by a thick, black sea of flat and angled plates supported on vertical rods. With all three works the viewer must gather together information, often from different

viewpoints in order to recreate the piece as a whole. For Philip King, sculpture, the most tangible of media, is "an art of the invisible", a profound experience that exists more fully in remembrance than in actuality.

The more complex his sculptures the less easy is the spectator's task. By the early 1970s King had developed a liking for clusters of separate units and since then an almost cubic fragmentation of form has occasionally surfaced in his art. When given a public commission, however, he resorts to more architectural solutions. "Clarion" stands mounted on a one balcony at the Hayward and is ready to shuttle into space before landing permanently on a six-inch Fulham Broadway. "Crossed" exhibited only in museum contexts, follows the dynamic gesture of the title and works against the grid of the Museum's display case. "The Mural" is a study in the use of space, its clarity of form and its subtle play of light and shadow. "The Mural" is a study in the use of space, its clarity of form and its subtle play of light and shadow. "The Mural" is a study in the use of space, its clarity of form and its subtle play of light and shadow.

## commentary

## Overskill?

By Richard T. Godfrey

Eric Kennington: Drawings, pastels and watercolours, 1905-1930.  
Maas Gallery, 15a Clifford St, W1.

Eric Kennington (1888-1960) is probably best remembered for his close association with T. E. Lawrence, for whose *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* he drew a number of vivid Arab portraits, and whose recumbent effigy he carved for St Martin's Church in Wareham. Although one Arab portrait is in the present exhibition at the Maas Gallery, this revealing selection of nearly fifty important drawings and watercolours is mainly devoted to his war drawings, and this usefully supplements last year's exhibition of his work at the Imperial War Museum.

The artist was a fervent patriot, and enlisted in the Artists' Rifles at the outbreak of the Great War, serving in France until he was accidentally wounded in June 1915. He then devoted himself to the depiction of war scenes, first in a private capacity, and then successively as "artist visitor" and official war artist. The subjects of his drawings are the common coinage of war artists engaged on the Western Front: ruined buildings, piles of rusting shell-cases, wounded men, corpses, and the resilient private soldiers in the portage of whom Kennington was often at his best. Yet despite the artist's unquestioned sincerity, and his abhorrence of what he had experienced and seen, few of these works have the ability to move or dismay the spectator.

The blame partly lies in his very gifts and facility as a draughtsman, evident already in the startling precocity of a portrait drawing he made in St Petersburg at the age of seventeen. Too often the certainty and ease of his drawings, their bold curves and deft square touches, lead to an admiration for his manual dexterity rather than a scrutiny of the subjects. Mundane or even squalid objects are thus lent a certain glamour by the brilliance of his touch; the corrugated iron of a mess tin, but suggested by virtuosic strokes of red-lead and blue chalk, and a large watercolour of "Ruins of War" has a romantic, misty suggestion of Venice. The dainty touches and tints of one drawing suggest to the casual viewer a delicate if rather disinterested

## The films of the book

By Richard Combs

The Postman Always Rings Twice  
Odeon Cinema, Leicester Square

The new *Postman Always Rings Twice* is the fourth film version of a novel by James M. Cain which one would have thought indelibly wedded to its times and its close-to-the-bone style. It doesn't seem to offer much scope for revision or interpretation. Written in the early 1930s, it is a tale of hard times, in which the two main characters murder for simple lust, briefly profit in unexpected ways, then succumb to inevitable misfortune.

Frank Chambers, an incorrigible drifter, and Cora, the wife of the proprietor of a roadside diner in a desolate area of Southern California, conceive a passion for one another. The disposable husband, but at their disposal, is tricked into betraying the lovers. Free enterprise providentially comes to their aid, the murder conspiracy becomes a successful insurance swindle, and they find themselves freed to live together with their mutual betrayals and the husband's business. Cora, after all, always wanted to "make something of herself".

Cain recounts all this with clipped matter-of-factness, skimming briskly through considerable amount of plot.

marvellously mispronounced periphery, doing what he confidently proclaims is "waiting".

Smoke bombs, verbal misdirections, an insane policeman, men dressed as women, trousers being shared ("I blame Wolfenden"), observes Rear Admiral Dora Braithwaite, O.M., the stern Chief Wren) - John Wells's play, directed by Dick Clement (not, incidentally, Richard Clement, editor of *Tribune*) smartly mocks Whitehall farce as well as Mrs Thatcher's world. The disastrous weekend occurs at Chequer: "Chekhov, Chekhov", mutters Boris (Jeffrey Wickham), as he inserts microphones in the daffodil trumpet, which accordingly blare back over the Dolby system, the reports Denis Thatcher (John Wells) delivers to Bill, the confidant he usually addresses in forthright letters in *Private Eye* but here communicates with by telephone.

The audience, however, knows perfectly well that it is not in Buckingham Palace but in No 10. After all, Downing Street is just outside the door. The jokes are topical. These

## The strident three

By Patricia Craig

Female Trouble  
Fems Theatre

"Female trouble", says one of the performers towards the end of the production, "it is difficult to envisage a more engaging or accomplished trio than the stars of this show - Anne-Marie Davies, Caroline Moh and Lou Wakefield - even if their material is sometimes less than adequate. One of the funniest sketches occurs early, the cocky, mother-and-three-children kit, which comes in the guise of a present like Sylvia Plath's tulips. A welcome asperity ("He said, you've got beautiful eyes, I said, I use them to see") balances the occasional sentimentalities ("My eyes felt very open").

For woman, it seems, is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward. Trouble with the children, trouble with her reproductive organs, trouble (of course) with men, trouble with her image, trouble with her employer, if she's lucky enough to have one. If she

happens to be a mathematician, the popular press, in its saucy way, will soon get around to her figure. If she's attacked by a rapist she'll be told: "Nice girls stay in." If anger makes her tearful, she'll be accused of hysteria.

These complaints are familiar. What's less commonplace is the cheerful, boisterous, lusty style of the production; it is difficult to envisage a more engaging or accomplished trio than the stars of this show - Anne-Marie Davies, Caroline Moh and Lou Wakefield - even if their material is sometimes less than adequate. One of the funniest sketches occurs early, the cocky, mother-and-three-children kit, which comes in the guise of a present like Sylvia Plath's tulips. A welcome asperity ("He said, you've got beautiful eyes, I said, I use them to see") balances the occasional sentimentalities ("My eyes felt very open").

There is a distinct falling-off in the second half. Jokes about the elimination of men ("we made them redundant") fall rather flat; a lot of time is devoted to a rignarole involving three dolls, which sounds as if it's being improvised though it probably isn't; song-lyrics are not noticeably felicitous: "I'm on the whole meal" (so says Sylvia Plath) - "I'm on the whole meal" - "Secret messages" - from the Stone Age, from Outer Space, from a housewife in Dorset - are found, to the delight of the audience. The original Silent Three in the old girls' paper *School Friend* used to go on like this too, making discoveries and righting wrongs. And indeed, "We used to be the Silent Three", the cast of *Female Trouble* sings out, "but now we're the very loud trip". Loud, indeed, and for all the pleasing self-mockery and liveliness of the performance - not too deep.

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# The novelist as father

By Edward Crankshaw

JOHN CONRAD: *Times Remembered* 218pp. Cambridge University Press. £10.50. 0 521 22805 0

Here he is to the life, the small, compact, sprucey-bearded, beautifully turned out foreign gentleman with the eyeglasses and the piercing look (head thrown back on shoulders, exasperatedly high), a little stiff in his movements; the aristocratic Pole who had gone to sea to get away from the congenitally unaristocratic Russian conquerors; the master-mariner turned novelist, now presenting himself as the Kentish squire, neatly breeched, with highly polished boots and leather gaiters; finely mannered, but apt to snap, to bite even, under the stress of gout or an affront to his sense of the proper, or when his privacy was threatened; apt to disconcert the local ladies by kissing their hands at first meeting.

His greatest privacy was his writing. He did not like talking about that, or indeed about books of any kind, to the neighbours, to casual visitors, to pilgrims. In the intervals of cooking and housekeeping, Jessie, his wife, dutifully typed his manuscripts for him until the day when he could afford to pay someone else to do it, but she took no interest in what she was typing. It is somehow characteristic that much of his writing seems to have been done in the middle of the night when the household was asleep.

His family life was also private. He was never to be seen in slippers even by his closest friends. But now, over fifty years after his death, we are taken some way into that life by his younger son John, himself in his seventies, a retired architect of Canterbury. His father called him Jack. He was nine years younger than his elder brother, Borys. But what Conrad felt or thought about Borys, who inevitably inhabited a different world from his brother, is not even touched upon; and there is equally no indication of what he felt or thought about the farmer's daughter whom he married in the early days of struggle, long before he had come to accept his divorce from the sea as absolute. This produces a rather odd emptiness at the centre of what is an exclusively domestic study. The son who clearly loved his father and was idolized by him, is loyal to his mother, who suffered for most of her married life from the consequences of incompetent surgery on her leg and was often in pain. There is sympathy for her in her affliction, but there are also one or two half-glances of what must surely have been, often a fairly edgy state of affairs.

Thus, for example, the small boy had a passion for Meccano (that steadfast nursery delight only very recently, unbelievably, wiped off the face of the earth as though it had never been) and for model steam-engines. His father once committed the evidently hard-to-forgive mistake of bringing him back from a visit to London some delectable "accessories" for the elaboration and multiplication of Meccano models—but no present for Jessie: the small boy was uncomfortably aware of an angry whispering, and in a day or two there was a new brooch from Aschford for Jessie, and thereafter no more Meccano or steam-engines for little Jack without "a trinket or a piece of jewellery" for Jessie. This was after fifteen or sixteen years of marriage, and the child was six or seven.

There is also a swift, almost imperceptibly fleeting shaft of bitterness when John Conrad reveals that after his father's death every book or manuscript or piece of paper with his signature or handwriting was sold—although the father had explained to the son that he was not going to give him copies of all his books because one day he would inherit his mother's inscribed copies.

There is very little more like that. But I think it is enough to bear in mind as at least a partial explanation of Conrad's sometimes excessively defensive reserves—and also of his enchantment, here revealed for the first time,

with the childish pursuits and the companionship of a small son who clearly had the sunniest and most outgoing of natures.

If Jack worshipped his father, it is also clear that his father felt closer to him than to anybody else, finding in him from a very early age the sort of easy companionship he most lacked. Perhaps only with Jack could he forget the harsh complexities of human nature, the continuous struggle with the sense of failure. Borys, though much older than Jack, was more difficult; Jessie was hard to relax with and also (as John Conrad makes unmistakably clear) liable to exhibit jealousy when her husband's guests showed themselves more interested in him than in her. But Jack seems to have been open and unquestioning, happiest out of doors, eager to be helped with his ever-increasing home-made fleet by his ex-sailor father, eager to gather all he could about that father's past life. This was a revelation when at last Conrad took him sailing in a real boat, out from Deal, to discover not only the admiration and respect in which that father was held but also the instant transformation of a stiffly moving, gut-ridden head of family into an active seaman nipping up the heaving ladder on a visit to the Gull Lightship, crippled hands and feet forgotten, the years shed like wrinkled skin—twenty years since he had been to sea except for a brief moment on a "Q" ship during the 1914 war. There is more in these last pages than in all the rest of the book about the power of the man with his remarkable ability to make others look up to him.

This is natural enough. We are in the last phase of Conrad's life and the child observer has become a schoolboy. The pity is that he was away at school,

except for holidays, from the age of nine until his father died nine years later. This is one of the reasons why the mixture is rather thin, and why some questions remain unanswered. But it is not the only reason: John Conrad has his own ideas about what should and should not be revealed.

In fact his unassuming narrative contains a good deal more than immediately leaps to the eye. The general effect is one of quiet illumination; it is not until one abandons certain hopes as irrelevant that the book declares its special charm. It is no good looking in it for the artist. John Conrad makes it clear that, for the best of reasons, he is not concerned with his father's genius (he is far too polite to use that word). He does, however, very engagingly flesh out the Conrad of the letters, of *A Personal Record*, of the formal biographies.

John Conrad was born in 1906. His father was then already famous and beginning to emerge from the darkest years of struggle. *Nostromo*, published two years earlier, had all but killed him, and another four years were to go before he could begin to feel safe in a material sense, though he had *Lord Jim*, *The Nigger of the Narcissus* and *The Secret Agent* all behind him. The first best-seller was *Chance* (I see from my own copy, dated January 27, 1914, that it was the fourth reprint in twelve days). But at least from 1910 onwards the household was comfortable.

It was then that the boy started taking notice, then too that the family moved from Aldington over Romney Marsh ("this poky little hole . . . four tiny rooms in half a cottage"), to quote Conrad himself to William Rothstein towards the end of 1909) to the moated farmhouse at Capel. This was

indeed an improvement—minimal services, but room to swing a cat, and to put up guests. They had a car, too, and a chauffeur-handyman. You had to be something of an automotive enthusiast to run a car in those days, and either comfortably off or a little recklessly living on the edge of or just beyond your means—as I think Conrad must have been living even then, with the faithful and extremely comfortably off J.B. Pinker to fall back on. But the desperate days were over; only the agony of creation remained. Great figures moved in and out, applauding—Wells and James, Galworthy and Crane, Cunningham Graham, Kipling, Norman Douglas (who nearly expired in a high fever at Capel, though Mr Conrad seems to have been unaware of the crisis)—and, of course, Edward Garnett with his funny frog face and almost perfect absence of humour, the beginning and foundation of Conrad's ultimate success. Also Ford Madox Hueffer, still not quarrelled with, though meaning much less in Conrad's life than he had done in worse days. Fame and adulation, respect, too, he had indeed achieved; but not yet solid prosperity.

And then, immediately after the 1914 war, came a much grander house: Oswalds, at Bishopscourt near Canterbury; pleasing to look at in its cool, Georgian way; less comfortable, John Conrad tells us, to live in than one might think; but a seal of mild affluence even in those days. Certainly rents were minimal and wages a disgrace, but even so, you could not run two gardeners and a chauffeur out of doors, and indoors a valet/butler, a cook, two housemaids and extra help from the village for entertaining—to say nothing of a fine Cadillac—without qualifying as a serious citizen.

This was a big step up from Capel, where most of John Conrad's childhood was spent, and a very big leap indeed from the Pent, when he had looked for a time as though this superb genius might be broken. What I miss in the narrative is any sense of the atmosphere of strain and doom about that household, which must have been wrestled to clarify his images and was a livelihood in return for them; or of the intermittent euphoria, the sort of still in the house, that must have been apparent when a book was at last finished and delivered, or a shining motor-car came booming up to replace an ancient rattletrap. We are refreshed by the charming and innocent commerce of father and small son, the relaxed conversations with the village blacksmith, the occasional asperities towards importunate or foolish visitors; the motor-car rides; the visits to Dispe; the great trip to Poland as was breaking out all over Europe; the chess games. But we have to supply the tension for ourselves. What was his mood when, badly stuck in a novel, he would haul the small boy out of bed in the middle of the night to finish off a game of chess, and perhaps play another? We are not told.

Poor Ford gets it in the neck as usual (he asked for it, of course; and in this particular case he did not like Mr Conrad and she did not like him); but the irony here is that these articles childhood memories bring out more clearly than elsewhere those aspects of Conrad which Ford and Ford alone, all his nonsense notwithstanding, knew how to recreate, using elaborate artifice in *A Personal Remembrance* to paint a picture the essential simplicity of which matches John Conrad's image in its radiance while, at the same time, exploring the depths.

before the rise of Hitler was not the term of indiscriminate abuse as has since become, but also that Yeats's involvement, both brief and highly individual, not to say idiosyncratic, had little to do with the actualities of European politics (though it was influenced by the lethal potentialities of Irish politics), but a great deal to do with his preoccupation with public order and his "aristocratic" concept of "the despotism of the educated classes". It took very little direct contact with the Blueshirts and their leader, General O'Duffy, to demonstrate the edifying despotism of from, it would not be found in that quarter. The episode closed, therefore, in an atmosphere not of high tragedy but of broad farce.

Dr Cullingford ends as she began by establishing that Yeats ended as he began, as "a nationalist of the school of John O'Leary, that indomitable old Fenian who dreamed indeed of breaking the English connection, but who also believed that 'there are certain things a man must not do to save a nation'—in effect, the sort of things which are now being done by the Provisional IRA. Yeats was not twenty when he first met the veteran patriot and O'Leary's high-pitched (though admittedly not very practical) nationalism stamped him for life. It is rather too much to deduce from that, as Dr Cullingford does in her conclusion, that Yeats was "essentially and incidentally a political writer". This is a partial truth, but he was certainly a political writer, and Dr Cullingford herself recognizes this, which, written in old age, puts the whole public clangour into its proper perspective.

How can I, that girl standing there, My attention fix On Roman or on Russian, Or on Spanish politics? Yet here's a traveller man that knows What he talks about. And there's a politician That has read and thought, And knows what they say is true Of war and war's alarms. But O that I were young again And held her in my arms!

# Trying to be American

By Harold Beaver

CHARLES C. ALEXANDER: *Here the Country Lies* Nationalism and the Arts in Twentieth-Century America 336pp. Indiana University Press, distributed by International Book Distributors, £19.50. 0 253 15544 4

Alfred Steiglitz liked to reminisce that during his student days in Europe in the 1880s he had seen in the streets many wagon-hitched stallions, with swaying penises exposed to anyone who happened to look. "In New York", Steiglitz pointed out, "such a thing would not be permitted. All the horses in the city are geldings". So in 1923 he photographed the underside of a gelding on a Manhattan street and called the picture "Spiritual America".

That gesture epitomized the 1920s. But, even twenty years earlier, Henry Adams had meditated:

The force of the Virgin was still felt at Lourdes, and seemed to be as potent as X-rays; but in America neither Venus nor Virgin ever had value as force—at most as sentiment. . . . For evidently America was ashamed of her, and she was ashamed of herself, otherwise they would not have strewn fig-leaves so profusely all over her.

Only Walt Whitman, as far as he could judge, "had ever insisted on the power of sex". But then Adams, obviously, was still ignorant of Melville. Perverse American literature might be—but not gelded. Sexual awareness itself has been a sign of emancipation from Europe. It was the recovery after the First World War of such spiritually potent ancestors as Melville and Thoreau and Emily Dickinson that constitutes the "American Renaissance". P.G. Matthews, oddly enough, was to borrow the phrase for his magisterial *Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941), backdating its range from the 1810s to the 1840s. For it was the "Young America" movement of the 1840s that first declared its aesthetic and intellectual independence from Europe. But it was the so-called "Lost Generation" of the 1920s that first took proud and conscious possession of that inheritance.

Retrieval was rapid and can be traced from D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), to William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain* (1925), to Van Wyck Brooks, *Emerson and Others* (1927), to Lewis Mumford, *Herman Melville* (1929). That year the quarterly *American Literature* made its appearance, declaring: "Within the last five years American scholars have awakened to the fact that our literary history supplies a rich and comparatively unworked field". The following year Sinclair Lewis became the first American writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize.

Literary nationalism, then, was not a broadside from the twentieth century. It was Emerson, in his Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard in 1837, who fired the shot heard round the world: Our day of dependence; our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands; draws to a close. The millions that around us are rushing into life cannot always be fed on the stale remnants of foreign harvests. Events, actions arise; that must be things, that will sing themselves.

So much for the *Edinburgh Review*. So much for Sydney Smith's rhetoric: "In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book? or goes to an American play? or looks at an American picture, or statue?" To which Melville would make the resounding reply: "Believe me, my friends, that men are not so much inferior to Shakespeare, as this day being born on the banks of the Ohio. And the day will come, when you shall say, who reads a book by an Englishman that is a modern?"

Hemingway, Edmund Wilson, Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens learning the delights of the eastern frontier, with a dual perspective on both America and Europe; of planting their own vernacular undefeetly on the map of Europe; and instructing Europeans in the international entanglements of their own heritage.

The key question, Charles C. Alexander thinks, is "when and how the United States might come to have its own definably national culture". The answer, it might be thought, is obvious enough in terms of Lexington and Yankee Doodle, of Cabots and Lowells, the bean and the cod. It was to extend such mythologies that William Carlos Williams (in *In the American Grain*) linked Columbus to Cortez to Cotton Mather to Aaron Burr to Franklin to Washington to Lincoln to Daniel Boone. When processed in the popular media—Hollywood and westerns—such myths were to have their

broadest and most abiding impact; and it was in the critical absorption of popular culture that modern American art was born. Anton Dvorak in 1895 had insisted it should be, calling on American composers to use native folk songs. Besides "plantation melodies and slave song", Dvorak suggested the possibilities in Indian chants, New Orleans creole songs and dances, and "the plaintive cries of the homeless German or Norwegian"; the composer should listen to whistling boys, to street singers, to organ grinders. Because the best music lies "hidden among all the races that are co-mingled in this country". Such, for all the variety of their talent, was to be the extraordinary achievement of Sherwood Anderson, e.e. cummings, Eugene O'Neill, Scott Fitzgerald, William Carlos Williams, T.S. Eliot, Charles Ives, Aaron Copland, Nathaniel West and Frank Lloyd Wright; their achievement remains generative to this day.

Professor Alexander's own answer to his question, however, is curiously ghostly and insecure: I have taken at face value the explicit statements of people like the composer Aaron Copland, the novelist Thomas Wolfe, or the painter Thomas Hart Benton that they wanted to speak artistically as Americans and to Americans, to capture the spirit and pulse of the national life. . . . I offer no judgments about the extent to which somebody succeeded or fell short of his or her effort to express America or to help create an American art. The point is that being American was vitally important to a great number of people in the arts during the first four decades of the century. That quality of being—or trying to be—is what this book finally is about.

That does not sound very promising. For the great intellectual movements, which showed Americans to be so self-consciously American, were inevitably European movements, imported to the United States under contract to Freudianism, Marxism, symbolism, cubism, atomism, existentialism, structuralism, or perhaps merely the garden suburb movement or town planning. As Malcolm Cowley recorded in *Exile's Return* (1934): "Art and ideas were products manufactured under a European patent; all we could furnish toward them was raw talent." In everything, he remembered, "every department of cultural life, in painting, composing, philosophy, folk music, drinking, the drama, sex, politics, national consciousness. . . . Like their seventeenth-century predecessors, twentieth-century nationalists were still dancing their cultural jig to a largely European measure."

Whether that dependency, after the

First World War, was still to be called "colonial" or (as Harriett Monroe preferred) "provincial", hardly matters. What was needed, as Randolph Bourne recognized in 1918, was the "desperate spiritual outlaw with the lust to create". What mattered was an independent American use of its own source materials and myths (as Emerson and Whitman and Dvorak had claimed); with an independent American development of European forms and examples (as Cooper and Hawthorne and Henry James had shown). Nationalism in itself had little to do with it. It could equally be (as in Germany or Russia) a programme for disaster. The time had come, announced Harold Loebe's *Broom* from Berlin in 1922, "to recognize a national art as profoundly American as Baseball, The Jazz Band, The Cinema, and the Dizzy Skyscraper". But the mere use of a motif from baseball or jazz or Walt Disney or drugstores ensured

ville or Henry James, could sustain such a discourse almost single-handed; they could develop it out of their own critical resources. Though some had first to go abroad and for most the new programmes needed spelling out. "Before we have an American literature," James Russell Lowell had long ago urged, "we must have an American criticism." It is this that the returned, nationalist mood of the 1920s and 1930s provided.

Men like Louis H. Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright had been sustained by the example of Whitman. His was the "word Democratic, the word En-Masse"; his the path to the liberation of body and spirit. Wright admired Thoreau's individualism even more; as did Steiglitz who, Viennese-style, founded the Photo-Secession. But equally sustaining was the spread of new magazines: the *New Republic* in 1914, *Seven Arts* in 1916, followed by the *Dial*, the *American Mercury* and countless more. New York increasingly came to be the broker of the modern; and in New York it was often Jews who controlled these magazines: Steiglitz himself, Walter Lippmann, Walter Weyl, Paul Rosenfeld, George Jean Nathan, James Oppenheim, Waldo Frank. "A Jew without Judaism, an American without America," Frank once described himself. A burning need for aesthetic and intellectual transcendence was turned by these renegades to the idea of America: a national awakening, a national renaissance, a national idealism. All could agree on one thing: that America, whatever else it might be, was not "Anglo-Saxon".

This alone helped to dispose of that querulous old bugbear, literary anglophilia. So many of these new boys had spoken German or Yiddish at home. For some, like Lionel Trilling, England might hold a special attraction. For others it was irrelevant; and when they made for Europe, it was the Europe of Berlin and Paris and Rome. But especially Paris. Pound's move from London to Paris in 1920 was to be decisive. Paris was to be the capital of what Pound called, with typical bluster, the "American Risorgimento".

But the "Renaissance" was not confined to Paris, Chicago or Greenwich Village. It was its manifold facets that made it a "Renaissance". There was

Towering talents, like those of Melville or Henry James, could sustain such a discourse almost single-handed; they could develop it out of their own critical resources. Though some had first to go abroad and for most the new programmes needed spelling out. "Before we have an American literature," James Russell Lowell had long ago urged, "we must have an American criticism." It is this that the returned, nationalist mood of the 1920s and 1930s provided.

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# The poet as politician

By F. S. L. Lyons

ELIZABETH CULLINGFORD: *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism* 251pp. Macmillan, £15. 0 333 26199 2

This is an excellent book, but one whose title does it less than justice. It is indeed concerned with the vexed question of Yeats's connection with Fascism, but this episode accounts for no more than the last forty pages. Elizabeth Cullingford's real purpose is braver and more comprehensive; to look at Yeats's nationalism as well as his Fascist record. More specifically, her purpose is to challenge the thesis advanced sixteen years ago by Conor Cruise O'Brien in a famous essay, "Passion and Cunning". The thesis, as Dr Cullingford summarizes it, was that "while Yeats was a self-interested, half-hearted and intermittent nationalist, he was an ardent and early Fascist". The case, presented by Dr Cruise O'Brien with typical panache, was a tour de force of special pleading, but although it has been challenged from time to time, it has been, and still is, influential in shaping the views of those who don't know enough about either Yeats or

Ireland to realize that it is but one of several possible interpretations.

Dr Cullingford traces painstakingly the origins and development of Yeats's career as a nationalist which, she would maintain, was for him no pose but a lifelong commitment. She has not much difficulty in establishing this for the early Yeats and only a little more in establishing it for the later Yeats, though she is, I think, on less firm ground when dealing with the period between the 1907 riots over the first production of *The Playboy of the Western World* and the Easter Rising of 1916. Yeats experienced a marked recoil from Ireland at that time and his closest friend, Lady Gregory, not only noticed it, but was for a while anxious lest it might become permanent. And even though the Easter Rising reawakened his nationalism, it was not until 1922, inauspicious year of civil war, that the poet took his momentous decision to return home and, in part at least, to remake his life in the service of his country.

Dr Cullingford's book draws together the various strands that made up Yeats's nationalism more deftly than any other I have read. But the lady does explain too much. To reduce Yeats, even in his political role, to a series of elementary propositions is like trying to analyse the

rainbow—it can be done but it misses the main point. And the main point about Yeats is surely the variousness and complexity which flowed into his work so that that work transcended time and place even when deeply affected by both.

By emphasizing the continuity of Yeats's nationalism, Dr Cullingford anchors him rather too firmly to Dublin and in so doing underestimates the counter-attraction of London. To interpret any Anglo-Irish writer simply, or even primarily, in terms of an allegiance is to misunderstand the whole Anglo-Irish condition, which is to appear excessively Irish when in England and deplorably English when in Ireland. That may seem an unhappy fate, but when it produces—as it did in the work of Yeats and Synge and Lady Gregory—what the poet called that "ancient, cold, explosive, detonating impartiality", then it allows the writer, however involved he may appear to be, to hold back from his material with a detachment which gives him at his best the characteristic Anglo-Irish stringency.

But if Dr Cullingford to some extent over-simplifies Yeats, she can still tell us a great deal, especially about the sources of his nationalism. Moreover, in her duel with Cruise O'Brien, though she does not collapse him (who can?), she often has the best of it because of her superior knowledge and objectivity. Thus, she can show that Yeats was much more sympathetic to the Dublin working class than appears in the Cruise O'Brien essay, that he was a more liberal and independent senator than his corrosive critic would allow him to be, and that he did not, as Cruise O'Brien suggests, break off his flirtation with Fascism when the Irish version of it, the "Blueshirt movement", was a spent force, but on the contrary, when that movement was at its height and when an ambitious epistole might still have been regarding it as the new wave of the future.

On the question of the Fascist connection itself she is sensible and effective. She does not attempt to deny that the connection existed—merely that it was declared and was to drag out its conclusion. It was a matter of "nationalism" (like Round, Eliot,

# The Four Monkeys

Hear no-Evil spoke if nevertheless At conferences which were well-attended.

See no-Evil wadded the tip of his ball-point, (I made black crosses against names he'd never heard of).

Speak no-Evil practised his silent measures, Mute as pebbles, the evidence of a smile.

The fourth went. It was the shortest verse in the Bible. He had witnessed the descent of man, and wept.

# John Mole

# Making friends with Stalin

By Kenneth Minogue

DAVID CULBERT (Editor): *Mission to Moscow* 277pp. University of Wisconsin Press, £2.50. 0 299 08394 5

Readers on the wrong side of fifty may remember the film *Mission to Moscow* as a place of patriotic nonsense, which displayed Bukharin, Kadek and the other defendants in the Russian purge trials of 1936-38 as a band of Quakers in league with Nazi Germany. Made by Warner Brothers in late 1942-43, it was prophetic communist propaganda, and one of the amusements of this volume is an appendix showing the miserable Jack Warner squirming, evasively before a House Un-American Activities Committee more than four years after it was made. Yet the whole thing appears to have been created out of an ambassador's vanity and pure American patriotism. No communist in sight. It reminds one of Humbert Wolfe's couplet about how it is impossible, but also unnecessary, to corrupt the British journalist:

This volume is one of a series of screenplays to emerge from the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research. Each has a full scholarly apparatus: Warner Brothers have donated the Warner Film Library and a lot of files to the Center; and volumes are pouring out, ranging from *The Adventures of Robin Hood* to *Now Voyager* and *A Midsummer*

*Night's Dream*. Scholarship like this is a marvellous excuse to relive those afternoons we wasted in dark places so long ago. The risk we take is disillusion when we discover what drove most of it was. But with *Mission to Moscow*, we are dealing with rubbish of a significant sort.

War-time governments are often keen to stir up some patriotic emotion, but it's seldom that they go to the lengths of turning history entirely topsy-turvy. This is what Joseph Davies managed to do. A millionaire businessman sent to Moscow as US ambassador by President Roosevelt in 1936, he was described much later by the producer of the film as "a pompous, conceited, arrogant man with greater political ambitions than his abilities justified".

There's not much arguing with that on the basis of what is here revealed. But the more interesting point is the way in which the folly of Davies is rooted in common American attitudes as they emerge in the sentimentality of the Hollywood film. *Mission to Moscow* is a historical pageant that reveals how lovable the people are if only they can overcome the misunderstandings which have usually been invented by evil people. Consider Mrs Davies talking to Madame Molotov:

MADAME MOLOTOV (with deep sincerity): I think we have much in common, Mrs Davies.

MRS DAVIES: That is a very nice compliment.

MADAME MOLOTOV: Perhaps some day we shall all speak the same language.

the "Harlem Renaissance"; the craft revival, signalled by the opening of the Whitney Museum of American Art in Manhattan in 1931; the rediscovery of Lincoln and Jefferson, whose heroic shrines in Washington were built in these decades; the recovery of the language itself, whose monument became H.L. Mencken's *The American Language* (first published in 1919). The depression years reconciled most expatriates to their homeland, despite all its abuses. As Van Wyck Brooks was to write: "our prosaic republic seemed curiously inculpable beside Mussolini's Italy or Germany or Spain". While for those further left, the survival of America depended on the "Europeanization" of its culture. That was the message from the *Parisian Review*, originally an organ of the John Reed Club of New York, the Communist Party's Manhattan affiliate. By the time its editorial board split, in 1936, on the issue of Stalinist denunciation of Trotsky, Lowell's demand for American criticism had been more than fulfilled. With the advent of the New Critics, the unimaginable was about to happen: of American criticism overtaking and submerging American literature altogether.

Charles C. Alexander is a historian, not a literary man. The strength of his guide is that it presents a whole cross-section of the arts: painting, architecture, sculpture, music, drama. His potted history neatly dovetails major figures and movements with bits of gossip thrown in. "Dark-featured, not really handsome, but well-dressed and engaging" begins a typical sentence on George Gershwin, linking the *Rhapsody in Blue* to the Concerto in F. The book can be recommended as a reliable tool, a handy companion to Henry F. May's *The End of American Innocence* (1959). But as a clue to nationalism in the arts, here *Conrad's Life* is as vague and unsatisfactory as his title. By insisting on 1900 as its deadline and on gentility as an opening move, it obscures all the tensions of the American *fin de siècle*. The initial paragraphs glow with an imperial sunrise. Yet the generation of the 1920s in its formal obsessions and that of the 1930s in its social commitments owed far more to the generation of their fathers and grandfathers than this textbook's insistence on new beginnings cares to admit.

Or, consider the ambassador's response to the discovery that the Russians are very likely to bug his embassy: " . . . I say nothing outside the Kremlin about Russia that I wouldn't say to Stalin's face. . . . let 'em hear. We'll be friends that much faster."

In the context of this Russo-American lovefest, even allies like the British and French appear devilous and classbound, unprepared to take the excursion around Soviet factories that gave Davies his really first-hand, and truly empirical, incomprehension of Russian realities.

The belittling of historical personalities which this sentimental humanism can produce far outdoes anything that could be imagined by more cynical mean-mindedness. The original screenplay included a scene, but from the final print, in which a disappointed Trotsky confronts a contemptuous von Ribbentrop in the German Embassy in St. Gato. (The introduction by David Culbert, otherwise apparently exact, refers to this as an encounter between Trotsky and Hitler which is, alas, too good to be true.) All of these men are no more than that evil power-seekers: they understand the goodness of the people as little as mere American politicians can fathom the far-sighted wisdom of leaders like Stalin and Roosevelt.

Dwight MacDonald at the time of the film's release got it right, when he described *Mission to Moscow* as "the first full-dress example of the kind of propaganda movie hitherto confined to the totalitarian countries".







